



ETHNIC LANGUAGE GROUPS OF NORTH EAST REGION OF INDIA: IDENTITY CRISIS AND ITS REASONS

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ABSTRACT

Language is not only the means of communications of one's feeling of the world towards another, it, in the present time, became the medium of expressing ones identity. Losing one's language therefore, does not necessarily amount of communication problems; rather it brings a sense of loss of one's dignity, respect and pride which are very crucial for independent living of a community. Culture of a community is inveterately related with the language they spoke. Various norms and values of a culture of a community is preserved and spread through written or oral form of one's language. So, language is the symbol of one's identity- values, principles and culture that one represent. In the north east region of India, the ethnic communities are facing serious problems in this respect. There are many factors behind this evolving problem among which mention may be made of immigration problems, increasing pace of globalization, the role of dominant language group, the role of existing mechanism as well as the mentality of the speakers. Because of all these reason, some ethnic languages are on the verge of extinction which subsequently leads to losing one's culture independence and subjugation of other strong community which has rich culture heritage and language. However, a positive attitude from all quarters will surely help to solve these problems. In this paper an attempt is made to analyze the various threat factors that the languages of ethnic groups of the north east region are facing as well as to pave a way to find solution.

KEY WORDS: identity, culture, subjugation, globalization etc.

INTRODUCTION:

Language is the means of communication. One can express one's idea and sentiment to another with the help of a language. As such language is a medium. A medium through which thoughts and ideas can be sent and received within people. However, there is no one to one relationship between words and ideas that it conveys. To speak in linguistic term, there is no one to one relationship between signifier and signified. This relationship is arbitrary. It is because of this there are many languages and dialects in the world. In this sense different language means different mediums to convey one's thoughts where an English language speaker and a Hindi language speaker differ only as far as their medium is concerned, otherwise they are same since both of these language can be used to express their same thoughts and sentiments. In reality, the difference between two speakers of different languages is much more. Because language is not only a medium of expression, it shapes and moulds the pattern of life of a community. Rules, regulations, norms and values, or in other words culture of community is built upon the language they speak. A language bears all these things. It becomes the identity of each and every community. Therefore, when there appears any crisis to ones languages, it appears to be a national crisis for that community. Losing of one's language does not only mean losing one's medium of communication, it may result in losing confidence, culture and freedom of that particular community, and also, may lead to culture subordination of one community to another major community. So when one's language faces any problem of crisis, one tries to safeguard it.

Language can be a good instrument to establish hegemony over other community. During the period of colonization, the British used the English language alongside force and diplomacy to extend its dominance over Indian. By including the English language in the academic curriculum, they wanted to transmit the British culture into Indian people. This process, if continued for a long time, would lead to the annihilation of the Indian culture. So, a language, if imposed on other, can be destructive enough to destroy another culture. The north east region of India is rich for variety of languages and dialects of late many of these are facing identity crisis for various reasons. In this paper an attempt is made to analyze the various factors behind this crisis and to pave way to find solution to this problem.

OBJECTIVES:

This paper aims to discuss

1. Various threat factors to the ethnic languages of this region, like
 - a. Immigration
 - b. Role of Government
 - c. Role of dominant language
 - d. Mentality of the native speaker; and
 - e. to pave a way to find solution to this problem

METHODOLOGY:

As far as method is concerned, it is purely interpretative and descriptive based chiefly on a hive of secondary data like various books, journals, newspaper and

internet.

THE PAPER : EXPLANATION AND FINDINGS:

The north east region of India presently comprises of eight states- Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Sikkim. An estimated 483 different tribes with a comparable number of languages and dialects encompass the region, reflecting its enormous diversity. In Arunachal Pradesh only, there are more than 100 communities speaking entirely different dialects, among which mention should be made of five major language communities- Adi, Apatani, Bhoti, Khampti and Nishi. There are more than 17 tribes in Nagaland having languages and culture. Mizoram has more than 15 communities where Mizo speakers were dominant group, spoken by 77 percent of the total population and their language is enjoying the status of official language. The other language spoken by the minority communities include Chakma, Lakher, Pawi, Hmar, Nepali, Paite etc. in Meghalaya 17 tribes were notified as schedule tribes according to the 2001 census, Khasi and Garo being the major communities. Other minor language communities that stay here are Bengali, Nepali, Assamese, Rabha, Konch etc. as per the 2001 census, in Assam 23 tribes are notified as schedule tribes, the prominent among them were Bodo, Kachari, Sonowal, Mishing, Deuri, Hajong, Dimasa etc. all of these communities have their own language and dialects and use Assamese as lingua franca. In Tripura, there are 17 tribes notified as schedule tribes. Tripuri, Reang, Chakma, Munda and Kuki are prominent among this tribe.

The north east region of India is rich with various ethnic communities. However, most of the ethnic languages in this region are facing some real problems for which they are on the verge of extinction. Immigration from the neighboring countries and the impact of globalization pose real threat to their language. Huge amount of influx of people in the last four decades from the neighboring Bangladesh jeopardize many languages of this region. In Tripura, for instance, the native Kokborok language used to enjoy official status before the migration. The native tribes which comprised the 70 percent of the native population were reduce to below 50 percent due to immigration. The immigrants now constitute 69 percent of the total population. As a result, Bengali becomes the official language and Kokborok was relegated to the status of second language. With this transformation, the journey of the community from centre to periphery also started. The process of marginalization also started with this journey. A language is said to have developed when more people used it more frequently- orally or in script form. History, literature and other kinds or writings generally enrich a language. When a language lost its importance, it influences its spread and development. The number of speaker will go down; the written output will decrease as well. A question might arise why an ethnic tribe cannot develop a language within themselves. The answer can be best explained with an example. As present, English is the richest language in the world. It has lot of speakers around the world. So this language has an appeal which is most unlikely of any other language. People around the world embrace the language and want to express their thought it, for which there are innumerable numbers of books and other works produced in that language. However, the position that this language possessed today is not attained instantly. It took years. The same can be said about our regional languages. If it has been able to attract and appeal people, than certainly after years of journey, it will emerge as one of the important languages. So devel-

opment of a language does not solely depend on the native speakers, rather it depends mainly on its spread among other communities. The English language certainly would not have so dominant, if it is only confined within Great Britain. Chinese language (mandarin), for instance, though spoken by the most numbers of people in the world, yet is not so influential like English language. It is because the Chinese language has been failed to influence people of other countries. It is basically confined within its own country. As a result the English language which is becoming the global language is making inroads to the Chinese language too. Once a language is removed from centre and pushed to the periphery, the probability of its growth is substantially reduced. Such a move will confine that language within that community. It will gradually lose its relevance outside. The number of speaker will shrink. Written or oral from which preserve and develop a language will also shrink. At that time of deterioration of language a different kind of development also takes place at another level which is more detrimental to the survival of a language of an ethnic community. The language in the centre will enjoy more privileges and will grow and develop itself. The development of one language in a region will make other language suffer and deteriorate. For example, in Assam, the Assamese language is used as the lingua franca. As such, the exposure and appeal that this language make is more than any other ethnic language existed in this area. And since language is not only a means of communication, but a culture, so the norms and values of that dominant community would appear to be common to all. And this would surely exert influences on the culture of various ethnic groups since by degrees; all the communities would acquire that culture. The ethnic languages, therefore, always face a crisis of identity here. It is this sense of identity crisis that led to the emergence of many separatist movements. Even the Assamese language faced that crisis of identity when a large numbers of Bengali speakers migrated from Bangladesh. The issue was so serious that a 'Bhasha Andolon' under the leadership of All Assam Students' Union had to emerge. The ethnic language always faces such kind of crisis either from the language of the immigrants or from the dominant language of the society. In Tripura it is the Bengali speaker immigrants that made the ethnic Kokborok language in danger.

In the time of crisis, government can play important roles to preserve and protect ethnic culture and language. In democracy, government is basically a representation of the dominant class of people. Though various ethnic tribes have their own representative, yet govt. can take decision without paying any heed to the interest of the tribes. In this case, the example of Kokborok language can be cited. Having lost their majority in front of the huge amount of influx from Bangladesh, their main language was peril. The left front of govt. which represented basically the Bengali Speakers, wanted to impose the Bengali script on the kokborok, though 'Tripuri Upajatiya Juba Samiti' had been demanding Roman script since 1967. This attempt to impose Bengali script was nothing but a policy of ethnocide and a policy to absorb and assimilate the indigenous people into Bengali culture and tradition. Therefore, native tribes vehemently opposed such a move and decided to introduce Roman script for Kokborok language when the Tripuri Upajatiya Juba Samiti coalition came to power in the late 1980s. Declaring it as communal politics, the left front govt. in 1993 re-introduced Bengali script. Thus, the fight shows the struggle for one's identity on the one hand, on the other, a struggle for socio-political space. In the growth and preservation of a language, the mentality of the speakers matters a lot. In the days of globalization, when the world is fast becoming a global village, people are seen to be less interested in native culture and more interested in foreign culture. A habit of blind imitation of others emerged. This habit also emerged more or less among the ethnic tribes of north east region of India. For instance, in the name of modernity we use more western pattern of dressing and living. While occasionally using traditional dresses and foods. Similarly, we use more English language while writing or speaking than mother tongue. Recently, it is seen to be a fashion to learn and speak English at the cost of mother tongue. One feels proud by doing so, though; actually they should be ashamed to do so.

How to solve the problem of crisis in ethnic language? This problem is not something that one can solve it instantly and alone. It is a very sophisticated one. It is closely related with culture. Deterioration in language will affect negatively in the progress of one's culture. Similarly, positivity in one's culture leads to the soundness of one's language. Therefore, the solution lies in making one's culture stronger than merely fighting for constitutional safeguard for the language. Culture does not only mean traditions and practices, it means all kinds of achievements that a community attained so far. Achievements are something that makes one community stronger, smarter and expert. The crisis of identity that one feels at the gradual deterioration of one's language can well be substituted by the hard work and determination of that community. A community can live with their head held high if they are hardworking and courageous. Today the English language is spread all over the world; its appeal is stronger than any other language in the world, but the English (British) are known not for their language, but for the very nature of them. In fact it is the very nature of the English people that gives English language its present position. Similarly, Israel, a country smaller than Assam, is known to all over the world. The country is basically a place of the Jew people and traditionally Hebrew language is associated with that community. But today, the English language and culture is making inroads to their community. However, they have not faced any identity crisis, because they believe in hard work and determination for which Israel is one of the richest, developed and most powerful countries in the world. So, today this community is known to all of us by this identity. So, a need to reformulate the concept of identity is necessary.

The notion of language as a means of identity is to be changed by concept of success and achievement to express one's identity. This new notion can solve a lot of other problems too. Various separatist movements which are sprung out today due to dissatisfaction of the ethnic tribes cannot be a solution to this problem. It can give them an exclusivity which is not a solution to the problem of identity crisis. Apart from this, the problem of immigration needs to be taken care of. The possibility of influx of people of different language group need to be prevented. In any situation, it should not be allowed to occur like the condition of Tripura again. Thirdly, government should give due respect to the crisis of ethnic language. Last but not the least, the mentality of the speakers should be oriented towards love and development of their own culture, instead of following others blindly.

To conclude, the various ethnic tribes in the north east region of India have been facing severe identity crisis. Huge amount of immigration as well as a few other factors is responsible for it. However a positive attitude from all the quarters will help to solve this problem. But what is more important here is the reformulation of the concept of identity. Identity should be based on achievements and success of community rather than on culture. However, it does not mean that they would neglect their own culture and tradition. First, they have to love their own culture and must try to develop it. But this love and hardship towards one's culture would be futile if they remain content doing this only. To preserve their ethnic identity intact and develop, they have to prove their superiority in the fields of science, commerce, literature etc. too. In fact, expertise in these fields will help every tribe in the world to solve their crisis of identity and will enable them to live with pride. This is the realization that is very important in the present day in the north east region of India to solve the crisis of identity.

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